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ABSTRACT

Problems in teaching English pronunciation to large groups of university students in Japan are discussed, and some solutions are offered. Pronunciation instruction requires close individual interaction between teacher and student, difficult if not impossible to achieve in a typical Japanese university classroom. However, it is possible to get feedback from a large number of students and enhance their motivation for and interest in English pronunciation and phonetics by applying some less traditional techniques and tasks such as phoneme cards, pronunciation-based quiz games, using a form of sign language, using materials prepared by the students, encouraging students' reports on various aspects of pronunciation and phonetics, and introducing elements of the discovery learning technique. Examples are offered. (Contains eight references.) (Author/MSE)

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TEACHING ENGLISH PRONUNCIATION TO LARGE GROUPS OF STUDENTS: SOME SUGGESTIONS

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SUMMARY

The paper discusses the problems of teaching English pronunciation to large groups of university students in Japan. Pronunciation requires a close individual interaction between a teacher and a student, which is hardly possible to achieve in a typical Japanese university classroom. Still, as the present paper claims, it is possible to get a feedback from a large number of students and enhance their motivation and interest towards English pronunciation and phonetics by applying some less traditional techniques and tasks like "phoneme cards", pronunciation-based quiz games, utilizing a "sign language", employing materials prepared by the students, encouraging students' reports on various aspects of pronunciation and phonetics as well as introducing elements of the "discovery" technique.

INTRODUCTION

If Professor Higgins upon the successful completion of his assignment to make a cockney flowergirl sound like a high society lady were looking for a new greater challenge, the best place for him to go and try out his unique pronunciation teaching methods would definitely be Japan. Professor Higgins himself could have been perplexed by the task of teaching pronunciation not to a single highly-motivated native speaker willing to take lessons any time but teaching it one hour a week to an enormously large group of mildly interested

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(to put it mildly) foreign students with very little hope of the students contributing at least some of their free time to do their English pronunciation home assignments. Indeed, the everyday efforts of a teacher of pronunciation at a Japanese university seem much more worthy of being immortalized in a play. What kind of play would reflect the situation better, a tragedy or a farce, a musical or a circus show?

The teachers of pronunciation would probably prefer to be left in obscurity and would choose another genre of literature: a good book on pronunciation teaching methodology in large classes. Unfortunately, there is hardly any literature devoted to this subject, apparent reason being that pronunciation, maybe more than any other aspect of foreign language teaching, requires a close individual interaction between the teacher and the student, which is hard, if at all possible, to achieve in a typically large Japanese university class.

Most teachers would probably agree that the specific challenges of teaching English pronunciation to Japanese university students are large groups and low feedback. The purpose of the paper is to suggest a few techniques specifically geared to teaching English pronunciation to a large group of Japanese students majoring in English.

There seems to be a few areas of pronunciation teaching where the disadvantages of a large class can be neutralized.

GETTING FEEDBACK FROM A LARGE NUMBER OF STUDENTS

1. NON-VERBAL RESPONSE

Introducing non-verbal response from the students while doing listening exercises can make these exercises more effective. Non-verbal response also gives the teacher an immediate feedback which is very important for evaluating the students progress and detecting their perceptual weak points. I have tried the following kinds of non-verbal response:

(a) cards

The students are asked to make cards with the phonemes, rhythmical or stress patterns or tones, etc. in the order of their appearance on the programme. At the back of each card the students are required to write down the key words illustrating the usage of each phonetic item under study (words that the students know well and would not mispronounce) in spelling and in phonetic transcription. The cards are used to signal to the teacher the sounds the students hear in the listening exercises. An example of card on the high rising tone and a phonemic card (both sides) is given below.

Phonemic cards have been already suggested for usage, for example, by Bowen and Marks (1992). However, using the reverse side of the cards, making the cards to illustrate phenomena other than phonemes and the benefits of using the cards in large groups have not been specifically discussed earlier.

Advantages of the "phoneme cards" can be summarized in the following way:

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-- students memorize the phonetic symbols while making the cards

-- students repeat the usage of the phoneme or other pronunciation unit each time they use the card

-- other students do not see whether the student is making a mistake or not while the student is showing the card to the teacher

-- the feedback the teacher gets when students answer by raising their cards can help him/her to observe which phonetic contrasts cause more difficulties and therefore need to be practiced more by the whole class and by individual students

--cards can be also used for games and fun activities

(b) clapping

Clapping or tapping is a well established method for practicing English rhythm, used for example in exercises from 'Clear speech' (Gilbert, 1984, p.55). The students can be asked to clap when they hear a stressed word or they can be asked to imitate the rhythmical pattern of a word or phrase by clapping similarly to rhythmical exercises in music. Clapping is very good for practicing rhythmical beat in poetry, particularly in limericks.

Clapping can be also used as a method of non-verbal response in listening exercises on other aspects of pronunciation. The students are then asked to clap each time they hear a certain phenomenon under study, for example, a consonant cluster /fl/ in the dialogue from C. Mortimer's "Elements of Pronunciation" (Mortimer, 1985, p.)

Advantages of the response by clapping:

-- it's fun

-- students who are not doing very well can rely on other students' performance

Clapping is a collective activity that seems to be working well in Japan, where

an individual student feels reluctant to take the responsibility of answering the teacher's question all on his/her own.

(c) other kinds of non-verbal response (gestures)

The teacher and students can develop their own signalling system. For example, students can show by gestures whether they think the speech melody is rising or falling on a certain part of an utterance. In the well-known "radio-tuning" game when the students are asked to listen to radio broadcasts and determine within a few seconds whether the language they hear is English or not, I was asking the students to make the "OK" gesture if they think the language is English and the "break" or "stop" gesture if they think the language is not English.

Advantages of gesture responses:

-- they seem to be making students relaxed

-- the students have a chance of learning and practicing foreign gesture culture

2. INVOLVING LARGE NUMBERS OF STUDENTS IN CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

(a) Pronunciation teaching games

We can get a feedback from many students, make classes more effective and more enjoyable if all the students are given a chance to participate. This can be achieved by the same methods as in other classes, that is by playing games either with the whole class or dividing students into small groups. Basically most vocabulary teaching games- crosswords, mazes, "hangman", bingo can be matched to the needs of pronunciation and transcription teaching. An example of a simple bingo game: students get the cards with sounds, the teacher calls out

words or plays a recording with words. The students cross out the sounds they hear from the bingo card.

Another example: The teacher writes a long word in phonetic transcription on the blackboard. The students use the phonemes of the original word to compile other English words that also have to be written down in transcription. Each student can try this task individually or the assignment can be given to competing teams. The time is limited. The winner is expected to make up the maximum number of words with minimum mistakes in the transcription and also be able to read the words written in transcription without any mispronunciations. wins the game can be given an extra point to their final credit. Descriptions of other pronunciation teaching games can be found, for example, in a recent book by Hancock (1996).

(b) Stimulating speech production from a large number of students

An important point of linking perception and transcription skills with speech production is trying to make the students use in their own speech the words or phrases they have used in a game. This can be achieved by introducing the second "activation" part into a game or a listening exercise. Already at the first initial stage the students are required to pronounce the words they have used in the game or heard in the listening exercise. At the next "activation" stage students are asked to make up a conversation or a skit utilizing the words, rhythmical patterns, weak forms or intonation contours from the previous activity. The "activation stage" may become the second part of the group contest.

While listening exercises can be successfully performed even in a large class and usually contribute to improving the students' listening skills, and pronunciation teaching games will undoubtedly help them to master transcription and reading rules and broaden their phonological and phonetic knowledge, still their pronunciation would probably not improve much without the practice with and correction from the teacher. This is, of course, the weakest point of a large class where a teacher cannot devote much time to each student individually. What can a teacher do about it besides giving up? It seems he/she can do at least 3 things:

1. GIVING A COMMUNICATIVE INDICATION TO A STUDENT THAT THERE IS SOMETHING WRONG WITH HIS/HER PRONUNCIATION

One of the ways to make the student reflex over his mispronunciations is to pretend you do not understand what he/she said. Sometimes there is no need to fake the misunderstanding, it would be genuine, but even if the teacher guesses the correct meaning, it would be beneficial for the student if the teacher asked, for example, "Did you say "eel" or "ill" , "Did you make a question or a statement?" The good point is that the teacher is both giving a better example for imitation and indicating the "problem area" to the student.

Pair or group work when a student is saying, for example, one word of a pair differing only in /l/ /r/ like lamb/ ram and the other student(s) is trying to guess which word it was, also helps to indicate mispronunciations of each individual student.

2. MOTIVATE STUDENTS SO THAT THEY WOULD BE EAGER TO WORK ON HIS/HER PRONUNCIATION

If a teacher wants students to make a real progress, he has to motivate them so that they would be willing to take time to work on their pronunciation individually. There can be many ways of making students interested in the subject.

(a) pronunciation games

like the ones mentioned above

(b) using fun textbooks and other materials like "Ship or Sheep" (A Baker, 1992) or "Pronunciation for advanced learners of English" (Brazil, 1995).

(c) using materials prepared or produced by the students like video-clips of their favourite films; stories and dialogues, poems, tongue-twisters or limericks written by the students.

It is amazing how creative students can be. I am giving two examples of pronunciation tasks produced in class by second-year Meikai University English majors in the appendix.

(d) making reports on various fascinating aspects of pronunciation like "the origin and development of American pronunciation", "Australian pronunciation", "World Englishes", and so on.

In this way students can learn more about varieties of English spoken in the world and cultures of different English speaking countries.

(e) a teacher can try to use less traditional techniques of pronunciation teaching like the "discovery technique" that helps to develop analytic thinking abilities, drama, or anything else the teacher is personally interested in.

A fuller account of "discovery technique" in a phonetics or pronunciation class is given by the author in "Discovering phonetics" (1997).

3. GIVING GUIDELINES TO INDIVIDUAL STUDENTS WHO MAY BE INTERESTED IN IMPROVING THEIR PRONUNCIATION

(a) giving out a reference list

In the beginning of the course it would be useful to give students a list of reference literature with pronunciation courses and cassettes they can use if they want to improve their pronunciation. Courses available from the university lingaphone laboratory or audio-centre should be marked specially

(b) giving optional home assignments

Optional home assignments given to the whole class would be normally done only by the students interested in improving their pronunciation. The most useful pronunciation assignment would be making a recording of the student's speech that the teacher would check and write comments on.

CONCLUSION

We have considered two weakest points of teaching pronunciation to a large group of university students: getting feedback from a large number of students and improving individual students' pronunciation. We believe that even in these areas a progress can be achieved by introducing non-verbal response, pronunciation teaching games involving all the students in the class, stimulating speech production, indicating the "problem areas" for each student, motivating students through various activities and giving guidelines to individual students.

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APPENDIX
PRONUNCIATION EXERCISES COMPILED BY SECOND-YEAR
MEIKAI UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

ILLUSTRATION EXERCISE 1. The task: Find all the / o / and / o: / sounds

WARNING: DO NOT POUR WATER ON HOT OIL

A flock of four foxes robbed a toy store of all the stocked dolls. The oldest fox has a long nose, the second is very tall, the third is strong, the youngest has a short tail.

ILLUSTRATION EXERCISE 2. The task: Find all the /au/ sounds.

I went to the country on a tour. In the night I was sitting in my gown in the lounge and looking outside. Mountains surrounded the hotel. A hound growled: "Bow-wow, bow-wow". Then another hound joined in loudly: "Ahuuuu...". The growl bounced throughout the mountains and the echoes sounded around on the ground and in the clouds. No doubt, we can't hear such sounds in a town.

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